

Society of the Query Reader: Reflections on Web Search

edited by René König and Miriam Rasch

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by Erika Herrera Rosales

Society of the Query Reader: Reflections on Web Search consists of twenty papers written by experts in the fields of digital media and technology. It was published following two conferences held in 2009 and 2013 by the Institute of Network Cultures (INC) in Amsterdam. The subtitle of the book, rather than its title, best captures the overarching theme that ties together the multiple analyses presented in this book: reflections on the power of search engines, especially Google. According to the editors, René König and Miriam Rasch, this book exposes the illusion that search engines are neutral tools that locate data and information and produce knowledge. In short, *Society of the Query Reader* aims to uncover web search as an invisible form of social control.

Before addressing specific aspects of this book, it is important to historically locate its principal conceptual proposal: a society of the query. The rapid advancement of technology toward the end of the twentieth century has been accompanied by a surge of inquiries into its impact upon social and political realities. In an attempt to explain social change triggered by digital technologies, new terminologies have appeared in the social sciences: the information society, the knowledge society, the network society, and the software society. These new conceptualisations invite us to problematise the advancement of technology by asking questions such as: can new technologies enhance horizontal participation and open up new possibilities for emancipation, or are they fated to be incorporated into centres of power? Are new technologies modifying the way we live for the better, or are they reproducing social relations of domination? '[W]ill we become cogs in the machine or system, or empowered savants?' (Mansell, 2009: 2). For better or worse, *Society of the Query Reader* does not greatly diverge from these concerns. It mostly elaborates critical conceptions of Google's monopoly over internet search, stressing its role in moulding society in the transition to the society of the query.

The most significant contributions of the book are found in the first two sections: *Theorizing Web Search* and *Politics of Search Engines*. One of the central ideas is that web search represents a 'black box' (Campanelli, 2014)

in which knowledge and data is transformed into 'informational totalitarianism' (Ippolita 2014: 74). Google algorithms and computing codes are neither transparent nor public, nonetheless, the information shown is filtered and prioritised for users. For example, Andrea Miconi's *Dialectic of Google* explains how centres of power are established by search engine platforms and are perpetuated by the prediction of results. He raises appropriate doubts regarding Manuel Castell's conception of power in the network society. For the Spanish theorist, mass media and the predominance of the internet have reconfigured the political arena, pluralising and democratising political participation (Castells, 2013: 454). Miconi rightly objects to this analysis when he states: '[b]ut this time Castells is simply wrong, in my opinion. People do not believe in TV anymore, but they *do trust* Google, and his almost naïve distinction between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' media does not provide a serious understanding of power as it is now taking place within the new digital platforms' (Miconi, 2014: 35).

If we are to take complex power relations into account, as Miconi indicates, we should turn our attention to the influence of the economic sphere, namely capitalism. Nonetheless, one of the book's shortcomings is that it downplays Google's imbrication in capitalism and neoliberalism. In the introduction, it is briefly stated that in order to critically comprehend digital searches we have to understand them as commercial operations: '[w]eb search is not just about providing users with [...] information [...] search engine companies are also driven by the desire to make a profit, and to increase this profit by penetrating ever more areas of our lives and social relationships' (König and Rasch, 2014: 11). Despite this realisation, the place of search engines in the capitalist economy is not adequately addressed. Instead, greater emphasis is placed on challenging the supposed neutrality, transparency, and virtuality of search engines, leaving matters of production, consumption and labour in technology companies out of sight. In fact, even when Google's role within capitalism is broached, the conclusions drawn are found wanting. For instance, Kylie Jarrett argues that while search engines cannot capture individual motivations and intentions, a process of alienation takes place when data is transformed into a commodity in the advertising market (Jarrett, 2014: 19). While Jarrett approaches issues of alienation and economic surplus, he dubiously presupposes that individuals can easily observe, acquire consciousness, and act upon the contradiction between the appropriation of their intentions and the production of surplus value: '[t]he searcher can thus never fully be captured by the economic system, even while remaining its product. To search then is to occupy this tenuous position both inside and potentially always outside its systematic logic' (Jarrett, 2014: 28). Moreover, Astrid Mager's *Is Small Really Beautiful?*

Big Search and Its Alternatives refers to the economic exploitation of user's identities and practices by social media. Her analysis revolves around the incorporation of Google as a part of society, and not external to it. If Google reflects our capitalistic society, which has acquired a tremendous amount of power, 'why are users still not turning away from Google and other big players?' (Mager, 2014: 62). Mager finds that most smaller search engines (DuckDuck Go, Ecosia), with the exception of YaCy, are ultimately incorporated into the logic of capitalism. Narcissus, another search engine, could be added to the small list of real alternatives. In *Search Art*, Narcissus is praised by Aharon Amir and Phil Jones as it 'invites you to reflect, evolve, and question rather than seek entertainment or the security of the known as expected' (Amir and Jones, 2014: 272). Regardless, Mager states, it remains to be answered how alternatives are to cope with the sacrifice of the convenience that Google offers.

In the last section, *Society of the Query Reader* balances theoretical considerations of web search by offering an engagement with artistic practices. In *Creative Reflection*, the playful side of Google is emphasised, specifically, how Google's search engine can partake in the production of poetry and other literary forms. Regardless, search engines seem to limit the imagination rather than potentiate it. Martina Mahnker and Emma Uprich put forward a stimulating argument on how algorithms 'can say something old and new, always almost repeating what was before but never quite returning' (Mahnker & Uprich, 2014: 257). Nonetheless, the two authors conclude the article by accepting the *status quo* provided by technology.

Another relevant aspect of this book are the disquieting analyses of search engine's global reach. In the section *Between Globalization and Localization*, Min Jiang and Vicențiu Dîngă challenge the popular conception of a borderless and cosmopolitan landscape of search engines. They bring to light the increasingly personalised and geo-linguistic barriers imposed by engines and even talk about a re-nationalization of the internet. In the same vein, Anna Jobin and Olivier Glassey discuss the semantic determinism and language constraint that are stimulated by Google.

When compared with the aforementioned critical assessments, it is Dave Crusoe's *Research and Education* that seems to be the odd one out. Crusoe is concerned with the digital gap and the acceleration of technology. In response, he highlights the importance of teaching 'how search engines actually work' (Crusoe, 2014: 225), rather than teaching the logic behind it. One could argue that algorithms and computer programming are based on a highly logical language that students have to acquire. However, by only addressing the pragmatic dimension of the digital, his proposal does not offer profound lessons. Not to mention, if alternatives were to be proposed,

they would have to cut through technologies opacity.

Overall, this book constitutes a commendable effort to redress common beliefs surrounding search engines' neutrality, accessibility, and scope. It adheres to a critical discussion of Google's presence as the lead search engine and provides a rich variety of articles on theoretical problems and practical alternatives. Due to the nature of the book, some of its arguments are not sufficiently developed. However, what becomes evident throughout the book is that a society that asks more questions and seeks more information does not automatically make it a more informed or better one. As Adorno, puts it: 'I observed to my great astonishment that the fact that one was concerned with social questions did not automatically lead on to questions concerned with the introduction of a better or a proper society' (Adorno, 2000: 11).

Erika Herrera Rosales (e.herrera-rosales@warwick.ac.uk) has an MA in Social and Political Thought from the University of Sussex and is currently doing a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Warwick. Her research deals with migration in the Global South from a decolonial theoretical perspective.

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